

FOUNDATION EXPERIENCE

Redefining Reading and Writing: Experiences from Language Resource Generation Workshops

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A group of 17 government school teachers entered our beautifully done up training hall. They were from three states Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Puducherry - and it showed clearly. They walked in groups, sat in groups, ate in groups, and even talked in groups! We realized that our first assignment was to break the language barrier, in order to initiate our work on language teaching.

To our utter surprise, the barrier literally melted away in the course of five days. And they were excited by the enriching experience of understanding the objective of language teaching and generating resources.



On the last day one participant walked up to us and said..... "In my 17 years of teaching experience... .. Never did I realize that it is not creativity that I lack (in developing resources).... It is understanding"

Thus the story begins here!

The Language Resource Generation Workshop was organized from December 6 - 10, 2008, by Azim Premji Foundation, in Bangalore. The participants of the workshop were a mix of government school teachers, content writers and lecturers from various District Institutes of Education and Training .

Why did we organize this workshop? Language has two roles in education - as a medium and as a subject. A study of current language teaching practices shows that:

a) Content teaching is going on in the name of language teaching. At best there are a few exercises on grammar and word-meaning.

b) Teachers have a narrow definition of reading and writing as consisting of reading or writing of letters /words.

c) There is hardly any recognition of different functions of language in the educational context.

Hence in today's scenario, language teaching is hampered by:

- Poverty of variety in resources - the resources used for teaching languages are generally stories or descriptive essays. The other functions of language are mostly focused on in the higher classes.
- Vocabulary teaching is confined to vocabulary in text and there is no specific methodology for vocabulary development.
- Resources are linear and flat with very little scope for making predictions, drawing inferences, different ways of organizing information etc.
- As children grow up to learn Mathematics, Science, etc., they begin to use different functions of language and use different ways of thinking through language. Currently, children enter the higher classes with almost no adequate preparation for learning these subjects.

Against this backdrop, we felt that in our language workshops with teachers we not only needed them to understand the theoretical perspectives of language but also introduce them to what "variety in resources" meant. And it could best be done if they developed such resources themselves.

Hence, after days of mulling over the workshop design, its objective as well as outcomes, we settled on:

- Helping participants create language - specific resources that could be used in giving language teaching inputs to teachers.
- Experiencing the process of resource generation.

The most effective way to “create an experience,” we believed, was by:

- Exposing the group to a variety of resources.
- Building on the experience of and diversity within the group.

Little did we know that we were in for a unique experience ourselves!

A significant proportion of time was spent in understanding and planning for the workshop. And we developed a detailed and exhaustive bank of resources/ideas ourselves. We developed resources across three identified genres:

Vocabulary Building	Reading	Writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Sight Words · Vivid Verbs · Descriptive Words · Rhyming Words · Spelling Patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Attracting children to reading · Listening · The Alphabet · Vowels · Comprehension · Identifying main idea, supporting ideas · Identifying topic sentence of a paragraph · "How to" reading · Comprehension following instruction · Posters and Advertisements · Reports - Facts Vs Opinions · Graphs & Tables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Sentence Writing · Paragraph Writing · Essay Writing · Descriptive Writing · Facts Vs Opinion · "How to" Writing · Persuasive Writing · Creative Writing · Picture Prompts · Story Telling · Sequencing · Story Telling · Cause and Effect · Story Telling · Adding details to a story · Altering Beginning, Middle, End · Comparing two different fairy tales · Altering Character, Setting, Conflict Resolution · Story Telling: Assessment

The work focused on Classes 3, 4 and 5 using technology and non-technology-based resources. We filled a whole box with samples of these resources. We collected a variety of books for the participants to consult.

In keeping with our objective, the method of transaction of the workshop was designed such that it:

1. Encouraged sub-group sharing and brainstorming of ideas.

2. Facilitated an environment that encourages creative thinking.
3. Gave space and time for thinking/planning and doing.
4. Gave space for inter-regional exchange and interface.
5. Focused on a presentation as well as documentation format for every resource developed to ensure that it was thought through and could be easily understood and adopted by an independent reader. This also gave scope for grading the activity with clearly spelt-out objectives for each class.

The day of the workshop arrived!

We met our group and embarked on a journey that reflected the lack lustre language teaching scenario of today. It was clear to us that the group came with expectations. They expected to be told and shown different things that they could take back. And this is where they were surprised.

We began the day with a short background to language teaching, which they heard patiently and then asked them “Do you have any questions?” and they answered, “No,” uniformly.

We asked them, “Do you understand what is being said?” and they answered, “Perfectly.” So we said, “Then let's start!”

We began with what they were most familiar with - “Vocabulary Building,” or “Word Building.” We displayed an activity: “Touch an object blindfolded and describe its attributes.”

In their groups they blindfolded each other. And from every group, we saw them identifying the object. Some said, “It's a tiffin box....no just a box.” Some said, “Mine's easy; it's a ruler.”

We said, “Now tell us the attributes.” They said, “Oh, It's long/short.... hard/soft..... big/small... rough/smooth ...” We asked for other words and they were stuck.

We then asked them to describe an experience like “How did it feel when you put your feet in warm water?”

or "How is the experience of eating this toffee?" or "How did it feel when your face was in front of a high speed fan?"



They did not have the words to describe their experience. We asked them why they weren't able to do it and they were taken aback by their own inadequacy. We asked them if

they ever made children enrich their vocabulary. And they all said that they did. They reported asking children to find word meanings from the books, fill in blanks, and identify names of objects. We also introduced the use of "sight words" in language teaching as a tool for vocabulary building. We then gave them time to create resources keeping this in mind.

That day we saw each one speak to members from other states.

They had a presentation by each group. The resources still focused largely on "naming." And the ones that explored further were of the nature where new words were introduced completely independent of their context - very similar to memorizing new words and their meaning.

We pointed this out to them in the context of language teaching. Some kept asking us what the difference was. Children should know new words and they know through this game. Some said, "But we don't understand." Some asked us what the difference between the two was. Some asked us what the need for all of this was.

We understood that they had realized that there was an inadequacy and that in itself was a step forward.

This process continued. We demonstrated a series of activities on reading and writing. The group began to see that the process of developing and using resources was not an independent activity. It was entrenched in the lesson and the larger language objective. They were struck by the need to probe further into their practice.

The following is a glimpse of some of the resources developed:

Resources without using technology

Chhattisgarh - Class 5

1. Give the children a topic/theme/event e.g. Summer holidays
2. Ask them to prepare a scrap book on the theme.
 - They need to have pictures of objects/people/events etc. relevant to the theme.
 - Make a list of words that depict emotions/expressions they will feel.
 - Attempt to describe a day during the holidays.
 - Learn at least ten new words that are relevant to the theme. And explain the relationship between the words.

Puducherry - Classes 3 & 4

- Make masks of different animals for children.
- Now encourage them to have discussion on a situation in the jungle e.g. drought.
- Record what they say on the board.
- Now help children make a 4 line story on the same

Orissa - Classes 3 & 4

- Give children a sentence with a context clue e.g. It was a evening. Children were in the park. Their dresses were They need to fill the blanks.

Teachers' Concerns

- How do we introduce new words to children, if we do not tell them the words directly?
- We have never developed activities with very focused objectives
- The difficulty is to move children from their first language to the second

Approach to Reading and Writing in the Computer-Aided Learning Program

The Computer-Aided Learning (CAL) Program is a research study with the objective to explore

whether computer-aided learning (including digital learning resources) can meaningfully impact learning and classroom processes when deployed by enabled and empowered teachers. Teachers are enabled both pedagogically and technologically in this program. The enablement is through a series of interactions that support perspective building among teachers on the teaching of reading and writing, mathematics and environmental studies. Since reading and writing abilities lie at the base for both mathematics and environmental studies, the program started with perspective building on reading and writing.

Perspective building deals with reflections on current practices of teaching reading and writing, attempting to identify problematic areas and reasons for the same and trying to address these areas by redefining reading and writing as a process.

Current practices of “teaching reading” show the following:

- It is assumed that teaching of the alphabet/words in itself will help students read. Consequently, students are often given inputs of letters/words for reading.
- Reading of letters, words and sentences in itself is taken as an indicator of reading ability. There is no explicit emphasis on comprehension. This results in many students being able to read, but without understanding.
- There is very little awareness of the kinds of errors made by students in reading. Consequently, 'remedial' instruction takes the form of more reading.

Reading however is a complex process consisting of three interconnected components, namely:

- a. Mechanics of reading which involves the knowledge of sounds (phonological awareness), sound letter correspondence (decoding) and word analysis (the connection between individual

sounds and the letters used to represent them.) This includes not only awareness of the phonics aspect but also sight word recognition, knowledge of parts of words (roots, suffixes and prefixes) and fluency.

- b. Comprehension which consists of constructing meaning. It involves not only getting the meaning of individual words but also combining ideas in the whole text with what we have in our own memory. Comprehension itself consists of vocabulary, background knowledge and the knowledge of the structure of the text.
- c. Strategic knowledge of reading which comprises being aware of the purpose of reading and using strategies that meet the purpose of reading.

The CAL program attempts to help teachers redefine reading by impacting their practices of teaching reading and assessment of reading. In this process of teaching reading, the emphasis is on using a small (about four-to-six line) whole meaningful text and the teacher modelling both reading and thinking. In this process, the teacher connects to the background knowledge of students, invites predictions and inferences, engages students in describing pictures, predicting the story on the basis of the title, reading the story and shared reading. After reading, students are engaged in comprehension activities like re-telling the story, drawing the narrative structure of the story, engaging in sight-word games, building word walls, etc.

A similar approach was taken to writing also. Writing was defined as a process of organization of ideas, making outlines, drafts, revising them etc.

An activity to learn the alphabet through names was introduced. In this, teachers help students to write their names (in large fonts, each letter in a different color). These are pasted on walls. Students first have to identify their names. They then have to identify others whose names start with the same

letter as their names (e.g. Gita will look for names that start with 'gi'). These are then listed. Attention is then paid to the last letter, the second letter and so on. After a week or so, names of parents/siblings of students are similarly put up and the same exercise is undertaken.

1. Reading and Writing are not just skills of decoding and encoding.
2. Reading is not oral reproduction of whatever is written.
3. Writing is not reproduction of text that is already written.

So what are Reading and Writing?

1. They are both active processes in which the reader/writer is engaged in constructing meaning of the text that is being read or text that is being written.

2. Children read and write only when they see the relevance of what they are reading and writing.

3. Children are unable to read and write not because they are not interested but because they do not find the act of reading and writing interesting.

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